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12 April 1989

Threats, Bluffs, Thresholds, and the Risk of Nuclear War

The "No Sweat" school of "critics" of the arms race who regard the actual risk of nuclear war, and thus the nuclear risks of our armaments and foreign policies, as being very low--McNamara, Bundy, York, (Zuckerman, Weisner?) and Blight (TCS?) --either ignore the relation of threats to the nuclear arms race and the possibility of war, or else operate with a very inadequate or invalid theory of threats.

Bundy's (quoting Schelling) notion of a "tradition of non-use" of nuclear weapons is simply wrong, denying the history of frequent use of nuclear weapons in threats. It obscures a major reason for having and "modernizing" a nuclear arsenal; a major element in international crises; and (I believe) a major condition of the risk of nuclear war.

McNamara's notion of the total "non-usability" of nuclear weapons ignores this historical record of use--as well as plausible reasoning that has led to these uses.

By ignoring the possible and the actual use of nuclear weapons in crises, Bundy and McNamara (like the public) detach (1) the nuclear arms race, and (2) US intervention policies and practices, covert and overt, from the risk of nuclear war. Whatever that risk--they see it as non-zero but very low, essentially constant or steadily decreasing (Bundy)--they regard it as unaffected by, independent of, both the evolution of nuclear weapons (though Bundy admits to me he has simply ignored "technological questions"--such as those that point toward LOW!) and interventions by both superpowers. In particular, they see close to zero chance of deliberate initiation of nuclear war by either side in such a conflict; and this is unaffected by weapons developments.

Bundy maintains this position even when he admits that threats have been made (in his book now) and that some presidents have regarded them as effective. He still argues that the threats were almost wholly bluffs, in every case (probably very influenced by his perception of his bosses, Kennedy and Johnson); he further doubts that they were effective, whatever, say, Eisenhower and Nixon may have believed; and (like McNamara) that they were bound to be ineffective, especially since parity: so obviously so that he tries to deny that Nixon or later presidents even made any threats or could have.

In other words, he persists in his argument of "The Unimpressive Record of Atomic Diplomacy," despite Nixon's assertions--which were apparently made to refute Bundy!--and despite recent scholarship which directly contradicts many of his



points in his book (e.g., concerning Truman, Korea, and the first Quemoy crisis: as well as the Nixon era.

Like the majority of the public, they do not see the arms race as posing significant risks, or increases in risk. Their objections to it are on grounds other than risk, primarily waste; and their opposition lacks a sense of urgency or high priority.

Likewise with respect to intervention. They remain uncritical of the past interventions in which they participated, and specifically deny that they had a potential or significant risk of nuclear escalation, hence that they pose any warning for the future. When past crises or wars are investigated today, they remain either silent (e.g., on Vietnam) or continue to propagate major falsehoods--e.g., on the Cuban Missile Crisis--except for new revelations that serve to reduce estimates of the likelihood of escalation and thus to be reassuring about the past (and future) potential of nuclear war.

In this sense, the effect of Blight's "lessons" on Cuba II--(a) that the crisis could easily have been avoided by correcting Soviet misperceptions--i.e., the US had not provoked a valid Soviet concern and response by the US covert policies toward Cuba, which persist--and that, (b) in any case, it was essentially without real risk, despite appearances and overt threats--are "dangerous," in MBG's characterization. They misdirect, mislead, and falsely reassure, short-circuiting both valid understanding, and urgent public concern and mobilization. I.e., they maintain or increase human, societal danger, and the difficulties of reducing it.

When I described the attitudes of certain unnamed critics of my own argument in my Research Prospectus in June, 1988, I had in mind, in particular, my discussions with Herb York. But the publication in the fall of 1988 of McGeorge Bundy's Danger and Survival put these attitudes into print as explicitly and elaborately as one could ask; a very large part of the book could almost be read as a detailed critique of my own positions and concerns. Although Bundy criticises and deprecates almost all of the pro-armaments premises and beliefs that led to increases in the stockpiles, the overall "Danger" of nuclear war in his title and discussion is low throughout the era and steadily decreasing in each decade.

In each case where newly-declassified documents reveal high-level discussions, often involving the president, of possible US initiation of nuclear warfare, along with military planning for their use and sometimes special deployments, he emphasizes not only the contingent nature of this planning but the lack of final decision or commitment by the president.



He leaps from the observation that such data, earlier concealed and denied or unimagined, do not prove or guarantee that the president would have actually decided to fire nuclear weapons under any of the circumstances discussed or others--which is true--to the tacit inference that the existence of such "contingency planning," discussions, contingent commitments and preparations had no bearing at all on the likelihood that nuclear weapons might actually be launched in some circumstances.

He points out, correctly, that there is a gap between what a president permits to be discussed and planned, what he even says he will do, and what he will actually do in the event. But he concludes, in effect, that the particular threshold between non-nuclear and nuclear weapons is one that no leader of the sort likely to come to power in the US or Soviet Union would ever cross, no matter what threats or commitments he might have made, no matter what pressures he might feel. (He does not quite say this, explicitly, but the implication seems clear).

From this point of view, data and speculation that appears to bear on the "closeness" of events and decisions to possible nuclear warfare is all beside the point and misleading. We have never been really close, there have been no near misses.

Is this wisdom, or is it reassuring obscurantism? It is hard to imagine evidence that Bundy would admit to be contradictory to his inferences, short of presidentially-ordered nuclear explosions.

At any rate, the questions remain important: under what circumstances might a president cross that threshold; what kinds of evidence might bear on that estimate; and what does available evidence of various sorts tend to suggest?

A new body of evidence, on President Kennedy's actual intentions during the Cuban Missile Crisis, bears on this question in a number of ways. On the one hand, it supports Bundy's point that a president can give every appearance of intending to carry out an attack--non-nuclear in this case--"if necessary," while privately considering and preparing to make major concessions--contrary to expressed commitments and ultimatums--rather than to launch such an attack, which he might even be determined to avoid under any circumstances. In other words, the ultimatum that Robert Kennedy carried to Ambassador Dobrynin on the night of October 27, 1962, may have been a bluff: to a degree unknown even to most members of the ExComm.

At the same time, there is strong reason to suspect that even if this were the case during the crisis and at its height, events might have swept the president, against his prior intent, into carrying out the attacks he had prepared and threatened. To



the president's own dismay, his threats might have turned out not to have been bluffs after all.

Indeed, his preparations may have been all too convincing to Castro, who apparently was convinced of imminent invasion and as a direct consequences ordered his antiaircraft to fire on US reconnaissance planes, ignoring the contrary pleas of the Soviet Ambassador. No one in the ExComm, apparently, entertained the possibility that Castro was out of Khrushchev's control. The shootdown of a U-2 by a Soviet SAM seemed to make it evident that Khrushchev himself had decided to fire at recon planes; again, no one imagined what was the reality, that this too had been without orders from Moscow and against Khrushchev's wishes.

Reflecting these two American misconceptions, RFK proceeded to give a warning to Dobrynin that another shootdown would lead to immediate attacks on the Soviet-manned SAMS and perhaps on the missiles. Nothing suggests that this particular ultimatum, against any further attacks on US recon, was a bluff at all. It might possibly not have been carried out if another plane had been shot--as Bundy points out, in the strictest sense no verbal commitment is or can be absolute--but in practice it was about as strong and likely to be implemented as a commitment ever gets.

(Explains)

RFK would almost certainly never have uttered a warning in these terms to the Soviets if he had imagined that Khrushchev might not--as in fact he did not--have the power to comply with it: that he had already lost control of Castro's antiaircraft fire.

If Khrushchev had delayed his decision to back down and remove the missiles for just a few more hours of bargaining over the terms, it would have been long enough for Castro to have shot down a low-level reconnaissance plane. Kennedy, surprised by this "Soviet defiance" of his warning, would probably have felt compelled to carry out attacks that would have killed sizeable numbers of Soviet troops, despite the risk, perhaps later realized, of still further escalation.

Thus threats, even intended as bluffs, can enlarge risks, causing responses and creating circumstances that can trigger other threats and turn bluffs into attacks. And this was not the only that way that what Kennedy may have intended as a bluff, raising plausible but "mistaken" fears of invasion, prolonged a crisis during which other events could have triggered, ultimately, an actual invasion, possibly followed by Soviets moves elsewhere that would presently have challenged US commitments to use tactical nuclear weapons "if necessary."

A strong argument can be made that Kennedy "might well" have found himself making non-nuclear attacks that were strongly contrary to his prior intention, expectation and desire: carrying



out threats that he had fully regarded, privately, as bluffs. Could not the same arise with US nuclear "bluffs"? Moreover, to say that Kennedy might, after all, have found himself attacking the Soviet missiles--following up or accompanying attacks on Soviet SAMS, attacks which had been triggered by the shootdown of American recon planes (perhaps by Cuban antiaircraft, which unknown to the Americans was firing against Khrushchev's wishes)--is to say that he might have ended up ordering attacks that he and McNamara believed had a significant probability of causing a low-level Soviet officer, under attack, to launch a nuclear-armed missile at a US city.

But this would be precisely the kind of nuclear risk-taking that Bundy generally suggests would be out of the question for an American president or secretary of defense. Contrary to Bundy, it does seem meaningful and correct to say that such risk-taking was very close, on the night of October 27, 1962 (since Khrushchev was hardly certain to act as he did during that night, and as quickly, to order the missiles dismantled at first light).

Moreover, since some such chain of events was implicit as a strong possibility from early on in the crisis--once the decision was made to blockade, fly low-level reconnaissance, and generally threaten invasion--the latter decision already implied a willingness to "risk eventually taking such a risk" of nuclear explosions and subsequent escalation.

Again, does not such demonstrated willingness to take what may have appeared a small risk of nuclear war in these particular circumstances suggest a possible willingness to launch one or more tactical nuclear weapons in other circumstances that might seem much more exigent?

Other evidence, historical and psychological, bears on related questions: What does it take to get a president to order or condone massacre; or, to gamble recklessly, risking various forms of catastrophe; or in general, to cross various thresholds of legality, or morality, or precedent, or risk: to move beyond traditional boundaries, to break through limits? What kinds of fears, in a handful of dust...to creat a wasteland?

[Betsy Tomlinson called me a few hours ago to confirm that Abby Hoffman was dead. "People have all kinds of decisions to make."]

*and can be got at  
implemented? What checks;  
How much  
do we rely on  
Prudence  
inhibition?*